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ABSTRACT

The decision-making process of the Alaskan Eskimo is examined, particularly with reference to educational administration in the school systems. It is reported that the effect of outside influence in making decisions has predominated since about 1867 and that, even at the present time, only superficial decisions are made at a local level. According to the document, the efforts of Project Tribe have been directed toward overcoming the century and a half of authoritarian control by establishing school boards in all Eskimo and Indian communities and training the membership in the responsibilities of what it means to be a member. (BD)

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Background Paper - 5.B.

CONFERENCE ON CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION IN THE NORTH

Montreal - August 1969

THE CULTURAL SITUATION IN THE NORTH

(Commentary)

Decision-Making in Alaskan Native Education

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Mr. Vallee has described in his paper the socio-cultural situation among the Eskimo of Canada which, in my opinion, is analogous to the socio-cultural situation among Alaskan Eskimo. One point Mr. Vallee raised concerned decision-making in Eskimo communities in Canada's Arctic Territories. What he said is that basic decisions have historically been made by outside non-Eskimo officials or individuals -- and this holds true for Alaskan Natives. What I would like to do is briefly sketch decision-making process in educational administration since schools were established for Alaskan Natives and conclude with some discussion of what the Office of Education of the Bureau of Indian Affairs is attempting in order to change a basic pattern.*

During the time Russia claimed what is known today as the State of Alaska, that is, from the last quarter of the eighteenth century of 1867, few schools were established for the Eskimo populations of Russian America. Those that were established for Alaskan Natives were mostly in the Aleutian Islands and in the Panhandle and were for the Aleuts and Southeastern Indians, respectively. These schools were for the progeny of mixed marriages, Russian men and Indian women, taught a form of Christianity, and some navigational skills. The decision making process in the Russian American schools rested in the hands of the clergy who were backed by the Tsarist Government in Moscow. It was an authoritarian structure that did not include a local voice in any serious manner.

Schools for the far northern peoples did not develop rapidly following the purchase of Alaska by the United States. In fact, the Russian government continued to support its schools for twenty years after the 1867 sale of Alaska, establishing a curious pattern of actually spending more for the education of citizens of a foreign country than that country, the United States, spent. Schools for the

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*This paper is based in part on three sources: (1) my Masters thesis, "Educational Provisions for the Alaskan Natives Since 1867", Austin: University of Texas, 1959, (2) personal experiences in Arctic teaching, and (3) recent program changes sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, United States Department of the Interior.

Eskimo populations began to be established in the 1880's, and this was accomplished largely through the efforts of the first Agent for Education of the Territory of Alaska, Dr. Sheldon Jackson. These first Eskimo schools were run by the various Christian missionary groups from the United States who were subsidized by the Federal Government. Dr. Jackson himself was head of the Rocky Mountain Diocese of the Presbyterian church while at the same time being General Agent for Education. Therefore, the early decision-making process for Eskimo schools was controlled by the various Christian missionary groups in the United States, and to a certain extent, by the Federal Government. Incidentally, the first Federal grant for education in Alaska, $25,000 in 1884, was administered through the Bureau of Education and went to Native and non-Native alike. This pattern continued until the Federal Government passed legislation against subsidizing missionaries regarding the schooling of its aboriginal population.

The shift away from the hiring of missionaries to school Eskimo children started about 1895 and was more or less completed by around 1917. Following the missionary involvement the Agent for Education exerted more and more influence on the decision-making process in Eskimo education. This in effect meant decisions were made in Washington for the communications of those days were slow, school reports frequently taking as long as two years to reach the Washington Office from their isolated origins in the Arctic. In effect, during this period of time the teachers were virtually on their own regarding what to do in the classrooms.

The Office of Education of the United States continued to administer schools for the Eskimo in Alaska until March 16, 1931, when it was turned over to the Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs. When this happened the schooling of the Eskimo joined an organization that had been working with the schooling of American Indians for three-quarters of a century. Joining the Bureau of Indian Affairs made it possible for the Eskimo to share in the Indian Reorganization Acts spawned by the Roosevelt administration's New Deal and administered by Commissioner of Indian Affairs, John Collier. Basically, however, the decision-making process remained in the hands of outsiders, especially regarding education.

Two important non-education developments did take place in Eskimo villages during the New Deal that have a relationship to current program directions. The Indian Reorganization Acts made it possible for Indian groups (Eskimo) to organize "Village Councils" in order to express a concern for local involvement and to begin civil government, non-Eskimo style. The other development was the establishment of cooperative stores and "Store Councils" to administer the business of the establishment. As would be expected, cooperative native stores incurred the immediate wrath of local traders.

It is important that I digress briefly and, as an example, describe the method used to establish cooperative native stores. First, village teachers and Bureau administrators worked with Eskimo groups to form a council and ask for a Government loan to be used for establishing a village store. Second, the Store Council then selected a manager from among the village population. Third, the managers ran the store based on policy established by the Council (Store and Village Councils are separate groups).

Store Councils received no training regarding their responsibilities. Neither did the managers receive training. The result was that the stores frequently did not do well and were more often in the red than in the black. The author of this paper served as a teacher in a one-teacher day school in 1954-56 and advised the Store Council. This cooperative native store, while the only business in the village, did not show a consistent profit and had never been able to repay its loan as called for in the original agreement. In the case of the Village Councils and the Store Councils, decisions about whether to have them or not rested ostensibly with the village, but the whole idea emanated from Congress and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Educationally, and from 1931 to the present, village groups or committees concerned only with education have emerged, but have dealt with the more superficial matters of the school. Today, basic decisions for schools operated for the Eskimo are made by Bureau of Indian Affairs administrators who are advised by their Education personnel. Local decisions for schools are made by school building administrators. Above the school building level, decisions are made by non-education administrators who are career Civil Servants. In this respect, educational decisions are still outside of the village and are also outside of the control of professional educators. Top level educational administrators in Federally operated schools for Eskimo peoples in Alaska may make only recommendations concerning school policy.

In recent years the Office of Indian Education of the Bureau of Indian Affairs has been interested in obtaining grassroots Eskimo and Indian involvement in the decision-making process and has started what is called Project Tribe. The ultimate aim of Project Tribe is to establish school boards in all Eskimo and Indian communities and train the membership in the responsibilities of what it means to be a member. The poor start cooperative stores made, though some thirty years later they are much improved, is an example of what the educators are trying to avoid.

An interesting aspect of the establishment of school boards, or local control for Eskimo education in Alaska, is how to overcome the century and a half of authoritarian control of the schools. The Eskimo people have been taught a certain relationship to their schools that does not include them and the Eskimo side of them in any significant manner. What effect will a change in the education decision-making process have on the school achievement of Eskimo children? After all, this as much as anything else is why education must be tied closer to the lives of the children whose ancestors lived in the Arctic long before the introduction of schools.